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ADOT unearths ancient village at Cordes Lakes

By Steve Ayers

CORDES LAKES - Some are calling it one of the more significant Central Arizona archaeological finds in years.

While performing a planning study for a new traffic interchange at Cordes Junction in 1998, the Arizona Department of Transportation came across a sizable scatter of surface artifacts lying adjacent to the current interchange.

In May, a team of archaeologists called in to study the find unearthed the remains of a colonial Hohokam village, inhabited from approximately AD 800 to AD 850, perhaps earlier and perhaps later, containing as many as 60 houses.

The site has been given the name of Antler House Village, after a preliminary excavation found burned antlers near the entrance to one of the houses.

The site is significant because of the volume of artifacts found on the surface, its location and the size of some of the houses.

"I have never seen that many artifacts on the surface of any site," says Toni Gentilli, archaeologist and project director with EcoPlan, the company ADOT hired to study the site. "We found over one metric ton before we even started to dig."

The surface artifacts included pottery, stone tools, turquoise and shell adornments, and carved figurines.

"There is anecdotal evidence that the site was known about when the Black Canyon freeway was built in the early 1960s," says EcoPlan's principal investigator Dr. J. Simon Bruder, "but in the 1960s, who knows what happened. They either didn't care what was there, or because of legislation they didn't need to care."

Archeologists have been working at the site since May trying to determine, among other things, who lived in Antler House Village.

The area in all directions around Cordes Junction has long been considered a crossroads for many pre-Columbian cultures and is considered to be the northern fringe of Hohokam expansion.

"One of our research questions before we got started was, who are these people. Are they Hohokam? Are they Prescott culture? Are they earlier archaic? Are they Sinaguan? This is where a whole lot of cultures come together," Bruder says.

"It's only a cursory conclusion because we are still digging, but based on what is being unearthed this is a colonial phase Hohokam site, primarily. There may be some earlier stuff and there may be some later stuff," he said.

Gentilli, a ceramics specialist, says the dating of the site, and the belief that the Hohokam inhabited it, is based on the large percentage of red on buff and plain gray pottery related to the Gila Butte phase of Hohokam culture.

The Gila Butte and Santa Cruz phases constituted the Hohokam culture's period of expansion, lasting between AD 750 and AD 950.

The Hohokam heartland was the Salt River Valley and the Tucson basin, an area they are believed to have inhabited as early as the birth of Christ. However, during the later part of the first millennium, the culture expanded northward to the Prescott area.

"We don't know why they came north. There are plenty of theories but few solid leads," Bruder said. "In their heartland they were farmers practicing irrigation farming. We don't find any evidence of canals in the Prescott area but they may very well have been agriculturists."

Antler House Village lies within a mile of Big Bug Creek, and a spring is not far to the south. Gentilli says there is an orchard currently located on rich soil to the south that the Hohokam may have farmed.

Excavation work shows that some of the houses were built atop earlier houses, indicating the site had a long period of habitation. Whether the occupation was continuous or intermittent has yet to be determined.

Bruder said that the size of the rooms in Antler House Village is of interest, but what that significance is has yet to be determined.

"The houses are amazingly large in comparison to contemporaneous ruins not far away along Big Bug Creek," Bruder said.

Gentilli speculates that the larger homes, which are the oldest, may have housed larger extended families.

The largest house unearthed, measuring 30 feet in length, and has been dubbed "The Big Lebowski."

Where the inhabitants of Antler house went is far more speculative than where they came from.

According to Gentilli, the evidence indicates they left in an orderly fashion.

"It appears they packed up most of the usable items when they left and moved on. To where, we have no idea. There is evidence of interaction with the Sinagua and Pueblo cultures but here is little indication of interaction with the neighboring Prescott culture," Gentilli said.

Several Arizona tribes claim Hohokam ancestry including the Hopi and Pima.

"Recently the Hualapai have also been expressing more interest in the cultures of the Prescott area. In fact they have been out to this site several times," Bruder says.

Many of the volunteers working on the Antler house excavation are Native American.

Some human remains have been discovered, all of which have been repatriated with Native tribes.

The site is closed to the public and guarded because of its close proximity to the current Cordes Junction traffic interchange.

The excavation will cost between \$750,000 and \$1 million, according to David Zimmerman, planner and historic preservation specialist with ADOT.

Site work will continue to mid December, then it will be backfilled. All of the artifacts will be donated to Sharlot Hall Museum in Prescott.